

PLAYING THE FIELD II

Video Games, American Studies, Space



International Conference
May 15-18, 2019

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)
University of Duisburg-Essen
<http://www.amstudies-ruhr.de>

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Organization
Dietmar Meinel

University of Duisburg-Essen
Department of Anglophone Studies
Universitätsstr. 12, 45141 Essen

Edited by
Dietmar Meinel

Design
Dietmar Meinel

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Playing the Field II: Video Games, American Studies, and Space

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University of Duisburg-Essen

Over the course of the last four decades, video games have blossomed into a main feature of contemporary popular culture with millions of players around the globe. The development and sale of video games has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Similarly, the study of video games has moved from the unassuming pages of (analog and digital) fan sites to major journalistic sites and academic journals. As an interdisciplinary field, Video Game Studies draws from numerous disciplines. Although American Studies has also productively engaged with the phenomenon, the study of video games continues to occupy a fringe position within the field. As the first of its kind, last year's "Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies" conference brought together American Studies scholars in the hopes of exploring, to quote from the call for papers, "the particular perspectives that American Studies with its highly diverse toolbox of theoretical and practical approaches may bring to the analysis of video games, and how in turn other approaches to video games (and the games themselves) affect and change these established theories and methods."

The 2019 conference aims to continue conversations about video games and American Studies in general to explore a multiplicity of approaches. This time, however, the conference features a thematic focus on a topic central to American Studies: space. The rich theoretical repertoire of the study of space has yet to be brought into conversation with the study of video games, and American Studies discourse on spatiality in turn has yet to incorporate how Video Game Studies has approached the subject with regard to its

particular medium.

From *Pong* (1972) to *Pac-Man* (1980), from *Gun Fight* (1975) to *Donkey Kong* (1981), space has been a core feature of (most) video games since their inception. As computers and consoles became increasingly more powerful, the representation, creation, and navigation of spaces also became more elaborate in, for example, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *Nebulus* (1987), the *Civilization* series (1991-), *Prince of Persia* (1989), or *Metal Gear Solid* (1998). In manipulating game-space, contemporary games such as *Minecraft* (2009), *Antichamber* (2013), or *The Bridge* (2013) exemplify the unique possibilities of a multimodal medium and its ability to imagine, present, and manipulate space. Today, space and movement in space are an inherent part of the visual, auditory, and haptic gaming experience as navigating a digital world continues to be an essential feature of modern-day first-person shooters, sports games, competitive fighting games, MMORPGs, or open world games. The field of American Studies has developed to no small extent around a theorization of space, as the concept has been crucial in asserting the experiences the land and landscape granted to white settlers in America and in the development of an American culture. While leading notions of a “wilderness,” a “virgin land,” a “garden,” the “frontier,” or a “city upon a hill” of the early period of American studies have been shed, spatial conceptions of North America and the United States as a contact zone, borderland, or transnational site continue to draw from geographical language. Similarly, the imperial and neo-colonial features of the geopolitics of space are as relevant as ever for drawing attention to American “legacies of conquest” as well as their numerous contestations. Contemporary scholarship explores the produced character of “American” experiences of space and place. For instance, the long-standing history of debates about North American cities as quintessential global models and the Jeffersonian tradition of rural, even anti-urban notions of open space and “wilderness” also speak to the perpetual contestation of space in US American culture. These two prominent examples indicate the

relevance of the spatial turn in American studies.

The conference seeks to bring such critical perspectives in American Studies to the study of video games and vice versa. Topics include the representation, (technological) production, and experience of space in video games; the configuration of spatial myths and symbols in video games; the interconnectedness of rural, urban, and suburban spaces in video games; the production of space through movement of avatars, characters, and objects; the geographical literacy video games foster; the function of maps and practices of mapping in video games; the formation of digital public spheres in online gaming communities; the dissemination of gaming in public spaces thanks to mobile devices and augmented reality games; the materiality of digital spaces; and more.

Program

Wednesday, 15 May 2019

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)

18:00 Keynote Lecture
Michael Nitsche
“Performing Game Spaces“

Thursday, 16 May 2019
Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)

09:00 Morning Coffee

09:30 Nathalie Aghoro (University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt)
"Postapocalyptic Frontiers in *Horizon Zero Dawn*"

Damien Schlarb (Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz)
"Filling out the Map: Traversal, Colonizing, and Conquest in
3rd-Person AARPGs"

Sören Schoppmeier (Freie Universität Berlin)
"Regeneration Through Violence: Playable Wilderness, the
Frontier Myth, and Making America Great Again in *Far
Cry 5*"

Chair Stefan Schubert

11:00 Coffee Break

11:30 David Callahan (University of Aveiro)
"Owning Global Spaces in *Uncharted 4*"

Andrei Nae (University of Bucharest)
"From Male to Colonial Gaze in the Rebooted *Tomb Raider*
Franchise"

Chair Sascha Pöhlmann

12:30 Lunch Break

14:00 Felix Zimmermann (University of Cologne)
"A Walk in the Park: How Ambience Action Games came to
be and what they can teach us about Video Game Spaces"

Greta Kaisen (University of Duisburg-Essen)
"Experiencing Gothic Settings in Video Games"

Henning Jansen (Heidelberg University)
“Blood in the Gutter: Intermedial Story-Telling in *What Remains of Edith Finch*”

Chair Sören Schoppmeier

18:30 Keynote Lecture
Barbara Buchenau (University of Duisburg-Essen)
“Imagining Anti:Urban Space”

Friday, 17 May 2019
Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)

09:00 Morning Coffee

09:30 Dejan Lukovic (Leopold-Franzens-University Innsbruck)
"Going Out of Bounds: Making Sense of Non-Intended
Areas of Play in Video Games Through the Study of
Speedruns"

Andrew Tzouras (University of Patras)
"Fast-Travel' and the Experience of Space in Game Design:
Creating Memorable Experiences and Enhancing Player
Gratification"

Maria Sulimma (University of Duisburg-Essen)
"Surviving the City: *Zombies, Run!* and the Horrors of Urban
Exercise"

Chair Chris Katzenberg

11:00 Coffee Break

11:30 Teresa Pratt (University of Duisburg-Essen)
"Sociolinguistic Variation and Personae Construction on
YouTube's Gaming Channels"

Patricia Maier (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)
"A Part of Game Space: Prop Hunt and Player
Identification"

Hanne Nijtmans (University of Groningen)
"The Inevitable Fate of the 'Dragonborn:.' The Illusion of
Player Agency in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*"

Chair Katharina Wood

13:00 Lunch Break

14:30 Stefan Schubert (Leipzig University)
“Negotiating and Narrativizing Space in *One Hour One Life*”

Juliane Borosch (University of Duisburg-Essen)
“Organizing Options: Orientational Mapping in *Detroit: Become Human* (2018)”

Chair Florian Deckers

18:00 Artist Talk
Anna Kpok
“Performative Playground: Narrative Spaces in Theatre Games”

Saturday, 18 May 2019
Casino of the University of Duisburg-Essen

09:00 Morning Coffee

09:30 Florian Deckers (University of Duisburg-Essen)
“Latinidad in *Grim Fandango* (1998)”

Rudolf Inderst (University of Passau)
“Putting the L in Ludic Spaces: Laboratories & Libraries”

Elisabeth Haefs (University of Duisburg-Essen)
“‘#GAMEüse:’ Planting the Digital Garden”

Chair David Callahan

11:00 Coffee Break

11:30 Ryan Linthicum and Lauren Kolodkin
(Smithsonian American Art Museum)
“Museum Space Invaders: Video Gaming at the
Smithsonian American Art Museum”

Jon Adams (Freiburg University)
“Why Videogames Are Spatial”

Chair Hanna Rodewald

Addresses

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (KWI)

Goethestrasse 31

45128 Essen, Germany

<http://www.kulturwissenschaften.de/en/home/index.html>

Casino (or Gästehaus) of the University of Duisburg-Essen

Campus Essen

Reckhammerweg 3

45141 Essen

<https://www.uni->

[due.de/de/universitaet/gebaeude_essen_gaestehaus.php](https://www.uni-due.de/de/universitaet/gebaeude_essen_gaestehaus.php)

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